



Buenos Aires

National Wildlife Refuge

A Sea of Grass and Streams of Life

With its grand expanses of rippling grassland and its miles of streamside riparian habitat, Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge encompasses landscapes that harbor an abundance of wildlife. Covering 118,000 acres, this rich combination of grassland, wetland, cottonwood-lined streams and sycamore/oak mountain canyons provides a home for nearly 330 species of birds and a broad assemblage of mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Bird diversity is greatest in the riparian areas, where a lush green oasis brings in orioles, tanagers, an abundance of warblers and a variety of waterfowl. Here birders can find a number of bird species at the northernmost end of their range.

This preserve of grassland, mesquite, and cottonwood and sycamore streams belongs to the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest network of lands and waters devoted to conserving our native wildlife and their habitats.

From Ranch to Refuge

The lush grassland of the Altar Valley lured Pedro Aguirre, son of a prominent family in Sonora, Mexico. He started a stagecoach line through the Altar Valley from Mexico in the 1850's. In 1864 he added a homestead and began a cattle and sheep ranch, naming it "Buenos Ayres" for the pleasant breezes in the area. Pedro diked a wash to create Aguirre Lake, which remains a seasonal wetland to this day. From 1909 to 1985, five different ranching families owned the Buenos Aires. Several adjacent ranches were added to the acreage. In 1985 the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service purchased the ranch, and the land became part of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Refuge objectives include preservation and restoration of grassland for the benefit of wildlife, particularly the endangered masked bobwhite quail.

The Habitats and Their Wildlife

At an elevation 1,000 feet higher than desert, most of the refuge is a broad plain and rolling hills covered with semidesert grassland. The pre-settlement landscape was a continuous expanse of rippling grass. Now the land is dotted with mesquite trees that have spread through the valley over the past century due to suppression of natural fires. Yet this is still a place of long vistas, rolling hills flanked by purple mountains, and spectacular sunsets over Baboquivari Peak.

The Mexican gray wolf and magnificent grizzly bear are gone from the landscape. Mule deer and pronghorns still roam the flat plain and rolling hills. Coyotes and javelina are abundant. Other wildlife include ringtails, four kinds of skunks, rattlesnakes, desert tortoises and occasional Gila monsters.

At the east side of the refuge are riparian areas along Arivaca Creek and Arivaca Cienega. Here is a delightful mix of seasonally wet marshland and meadow, stately cottonwoods, and hackberry and mesquite groves. These rare wetlands in the dry Southwest are of great value to wildlife. In this leafy green oasis is the ruby-red glow of summer tanagers or vermilion flycatchers, the oriole's liquid melody, and the plaintive whistle of the gray hawk. Here lucky birders may find subtropical specialties at the northern end of their species range: Gray hawks and black-bellied whistling ducks are regularly seen. Tropical and thick-billed kingbirds are possible, and even a green kingfisher or northern beardless tyrannulet are occasionally sighted.



Ocotillo in Sonoran grasslands.
Photograph by David Tubbs

Beautiful Brown Canyon flanks the west side of the refuge in the foothills of the Baboquivari Mountains. Here a sycamore-lined stream meanders under live oaks. Although dry much of the year, the stream at other times gurgles under sycamores and fills rock pools. At the cooler elevations of 4 to 5,000 feet, Coues white-tailed deer replace the mule deer found in the lower valley. This rugged country is habitat for mountain lions and javelina. Here also are ringtails and coati mundis, interesting members of the raccoon family. This rugged mountain range may harbor an occasional wandering jaguar from Mexico. A jaguar was photographed just north of the refuge boundary in 1996.

Putting the Pieces Together Again

The major goal of refuge management is restoration of the original landscape of open, semidesert grassland and the native wildlife that inhabited this area in pre-settlement times.

Fire as a Friend

Early settlers referred to the lush prairies of this valley as a sea of flowing grass. A number of factors, including overgrazing and drought, reduced the fuel that carries natural fires. Then mesquite trees and shrubby vegetation took over the grassland. The refuge uses prescribed burning to inhibit the growth and spread



Masked Bobwhite Quail
Photograph by Paul Zimmerman

of mesquite trees and to remove small shrubs called snakeweed and burroweed. Fires return nutrients to the soil and stimulate growth of new grasses and food plants for wildlife.

Preventing Extinction

This masked bobwhite quail was extirpated from the United States in the early 1900's. This highly endangered bird is now being bred in captivity on the refuge and released to the wild. Refuge biologists cooperate with ranchers and biologists in Mexico to restore the grasslands in Sonora where a few wild birds remain. A caring partnership of public and private interests is vital to restore the native grassland and the masked bobwhites that depend on it.

Like the masked bobwhite, pronghorn disappeared from southern Arizona by the early 1900's. After relocations from Texas and northern Arizona, about 50 pronghorns now reside on the refuge.

Other threatened or endangered species include the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl, Chiricahua leopard frog, lesser long-nosed bat, Pima pineapple cactus, and Kearney bluestar.

Things to do at the Refuge



Hiking and Wildlife Watching

Arivaca Cienega Trail stretches 1.25 miles over a boardwalk and path, through a seasonally wet meadow and through mesquite and hackberry groves. Trailhead is ¼ mile east of Arivaca.

Arivaca Creek Trail winds one mile along the seasonal stream beneath towering cottonwoods. Trailhead is 2 miles west of Arivaca. Mustang Trail is a 5-mile round

trip that branches off the Arivaca Creek Trail ¼ mile downstream from the trailhead. The rugged trail climbs El Cerro, a small mountain with steep sections at the top.

Over 200 miles of dirt road meander through the refuge. Many of the back roads in the southeast and northeast grasslands are good for hiking and backpacking.

You will find excellent birding on the refuge. The best abundance and diversity are on the riparian trails at the Cienega and Creek. Free guided bird walks start at the Cienega Trail at 8 am every Saturday, November through April. No reservations needed.

Brown Canyon guided nature hikes are on the 2nd and 4th Saturdays of the month, November through April. Overnight educational nature workshops are offered at the Environmental Education Center in Brown Canyon. Call 520/823-4251, ext. 116 for information on hikes and workshops.

Driving Loop

Pronghorn Drive circles 10 miles through open grassland with sweeping views of the Altar Valley. Follow signs off the entry road just south of headquarters.

Camping

Sleep under a star-studded sky, with a yellow moon rising over mountain silhouettes. The nearly 100 primitive campsites require no reservation or fee. Use only dead and down wood.

Picnicking

Picnic tables and rest rooms are at the Arivaca Cienega Trailhead and at the Headquarters Visitor Center.

Mountain Biking

Over 200 miles of back roads are available for bicycle riding. The more rugged roads are in the southeast and northeast sections of the refuge.

Horseback Riding

Riders may use any of the refuge roads, except for the Brown Canyon and Arivaca sections. Campers on horseback must provide their own feed and water during their stay and tether horses at night. Groups over four people must obtain a special use permit.

Hunting

Hunting is permitted on approximately 90% of the refuge during daylight hours from September 1 through late February or early March. Seasons are for mule and white-tailed deer, javelina, white-winged and mourning doves, waterfowl, coot, and cottontail rabbits. Coyotes may be hunted with a Special Use Permit, available April through May (changes pending—please call for current regulations). Quail hunting is not open. Hunters must possess a valid state hunting license and applicable big game, waterfowl, archery tags and/or stamps. Check the Arizona Game & Fish Department web page at www.gf.state.az.us for further information. Hunt brochures are at the two refuge visitor centers and brochure boxes along entrance roads.

Hours/Contact Information

The refuge is open to public use 24 hours a day. The Headquarters Visitor Center is open 7:30 am to 4:00 pm seven days a week (closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day). Closed weekends during the summer. For information, phone 520/823-4251, ext. 116 or email Kathie_Senter@fws.gov Buenos Aires NWR website: southwest.fws.gov/refuges/arizona/buenosaires

Getting There

Headquarters and Visitor Center: From Tucson, go west on Ajo Way (Highway 86) to Three Points. At Three Points, travel 38 miles south on Highway 286 to milepost 7.5. If traveling on Interstate 19, take the Amado/Arivaca exit west, turn right at the T, then left at the Cow Palace onto Arivaca Road. Go west 35 miles to Highway 286, then left to milepost 7.5.

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